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The Artist, the Scholar and the Next School

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The Artist, the Scholar and the Next School

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RÉFÉRENCE

G. James Daichendt. *Artistscholar: Reflections on writing and research*, Bristol: Intellect Books, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2012
 Garry Neill Kennedy. *The Last art college: Nova Scotia College of art and design, 1968-1978*, Cambridge: MIT Press; Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2012
 Alan Thornton. *Artist, researcher, teacher: A study of professional identity in art and education*, Bristol: Intellect Books ; Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2012

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Brian Horihan

- 1 This summer the Documenta exhibition opened in Kassel with a strange and powerful dedicatory inscription: we were told that a dance had been “frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and [had] lasted for a long time,”¹ that “the riddle of art is that we do not know what it is, until it is no longer that which it was,” that “it is defined even by what it *fails* to achieve.”² Further, DOCUMENTA (13) proclaimed its dedication to “artistic research and forms of imagination that explore commitment, matter, things, embodiment, and active life in connection with, yet not subordinated to, theory.”³ Artistic research, the embodiment of theory, the passage of ideas into life: might this, then, be a way of making art at once a dancing machine and an activity opening onto the future?

- 2 Over the past several years, initially in the UK and the United States, then everywhere in Europe and the rest of the world, events looking at the relationship between art and research have been more and more frequent. I am referring to the conferences *Art as a Thinking Process – Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (at the Faculty of Arts and Design in Venice) and *Research Week* (organized by EARN – European Art Research Network during DOCUMENTA (13) and to the conference and forum “Art & Research” organized by the French Ministry of Culture in Paris in February 2012. Alongside these events, publications have appeared: in French, in 2011, *Recherche en art(s)*, edited by Jehanne Dautrey; *In actu – De l’expérimental dans l’art* (2009) followed by *In Octavo: des formats dans l’art* (2012), co-published by ESAAA / Les presses du réel; *R&C Recherche et Création: art, technologie, pédagogie, innovation* (2010), coordinated by Samuel Bianchini... Publications in English have also been numerous: the online journal *Art&Research*⁴ (seven issues since 2007), works on graduate programs in art (*Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art* (2009), edited by James Elkins)... Many of these works place art schools at the center of these investigations. It is true that as institutions of higher learning, these schools are as much concerned with research as with teaching. It therefore makes sense that they would play a major role in defining the problem. To this end, the photographer Alan Thornton, a professor at Anglia Ruskin University (Cambridge & Chelmsford) has published *Artist, Researcher, Teacher: A Study of Professional Identity in Art and Education*. In it, he seeks to offer tools to artists who see their “identity” being displaced by teaching and research. The Californian art critic and historian G. James Daichendt (Azusa Pacific University and Boston University) has likewise published *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing and Research*, a work that also aims to produce an analysis of such displacements by focusing on the questions of writing, paratext and theory. Etc. Etc.
- 3 This current batch of books on the subject is often redundant and constantly asks questions that lead nowhere (What is artistic research? Is art always in some sense research? Can an exhibition be considered a summary of one’s research? etc.), but it has also enabled, albeit rarely, by presenting concrete examples, critically examined,⁵ certain living problems in teaching and learning to be reformulated and renewed. These problems extend to the relationship between uncertainty and experimentation, and to research as an activity both forward-looking and exhilarating. They are, in sum, the problems posed by the frenetic dance at DOCUMENTA (13).
- 4 In surveying these recent works and events, then, it would seem that we have come to a crossroads. “Artistic research” has become fashionable the world over, and we should be asking ourselves what this fashion is all about. What is meant by this imperative to carry out research. What fortune, or what danger, awaits the art world in this context? Unfortunately, the objective reasons for this vogue are anything but comforting.
- 5 First of all, there was the enormous push to standardize advanced degrees across Europe following the signing of the Bologna Accords. By bringing all higher education, including art schools, into line with the LMD Licence Masters Doctorate system, this move also imposed a certain clearly defined relation to research: in the Licence program, students would acquire foundational knowledge in a field; next, in the Masters program, they would learn how to carry out research in this field; finally, in preparation for the Doctorate, students would themselves become scholars in the field. University art programs have therefore been obliged to explain what sort of “research” they have been doing, or else – and this was the debate in France – to accept to “piggyback” on another discipline’s research, however alien to art’s own proper concerns... This injunction took

on several different forms and its effects are still far from being measured, but it should be noted that art schools, and the art world in general, rather quickly got to work answering the question. So the current fashion for “research” probably had its origins here: people started working on the subject, talking about it, writing articles, holding conferences... It is what is known as a fad.

- 6 But the extent of the phenomenon cannot be explained from a strictly technical or structural point of view (the LMD system). Our social structures, as we have known at least since Max Weber’s analysis of the “spirit of capitalism,”⁶ are constructed in such a way as to be identical with the ideology of our time, and here, the injunction brought against art departments to explain their “research” clearly has something to do with the new type of spirit⁷ that lies behind France’s recent university reforms⁸. In this sense, “research” is, more than anything, a way of reconciling art with a certain capitalism of creativity, of making it participate in an economy of innovation and work toward the same goals as other “creators” – of automobiles, clothing, events, services, technologies, etc. The fashion for “research” in the art world, then, has much to do with the demand for art to be profitable to society, and this in the context of a given economy and a given society, namely our own.
- 7 We can see why and how this demand is embarrassing. For if art has always been asked to justify itself in terms of its utility, and if it has answered differently at various times in history, the problem in an era of advanced capitalism is that the answers are most often announced at the same time as the questions.
- 8 So should artists be doing research at all? Shouldn’t they be occupied first and foremost with “not mak[ing] any more boring art” – as John Baldessari had his art students write for an entire day on the walls of the exhibition space at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1971?⁹ Isn’t it by cultivating above all their powers of creative affirmation, their ability to bring forth worlds – and not only to furnish, decorate and inhabit them – that artists discover within themselves the means to create “frenetic dances,” ecstatic events both created and creative?¹⁰
- 9 It would seem hard to accept the social obligation of “research,” the solemn title of “researcher” and the drive toward “best practices” in art, while at the same time wishing to lay claim to the tradition of Francis Picabia, a self-proclaimed *suramateur* who claimed to surpass even amateurs in their amateurism, and who held that “professionals are machines for spewing out bullshit”¹¹... Besides, it’s almost impossible to hear the expression “Best Practices” (which are supposed to emerge from any research practice) without immediately seeing in this an attempt to class research according to hierarchical values – and consequently to declare null and void Robert Filliou’s powerful and very subtle “principle of equivalence” (but also the art of cruelty, idiocy, savagery, etc.). So maybe we don’t really need research, experts or expertises at all? Maybe art should be satisfied with work, leisurely rhythms and precision?¹²
- 10 The debate is still ongoing. It would seem, however, that between the outright rejection of “research” on the one hand and, on the other hand, its blissful acceptance and the cooptation of art, some have discovered a narrow, middle path that seems to offer a resolution: research, but without its *Best Practices*; researchers, but without authoritarian hierarchies; European diplomas, but without exiting the art world.
- 11 In universities, and more generally in the world today, research is beginning to appear as a specific *régime* of artistic activity, regardless of the *format* in which the research was

carried out or made available¹³ (workshops, exhibitions, art works, art shows, conferences, books...). This *régime* is characterized by its willingness to confront the unknown, its forward-looking approach, its desire to create new and unusual spaces, but also by its readiness to disseminate and share its results. Not all artistic activity is research, then, as many works and exhibitions show us things we've already seen, without striving in new directions – in order to be convinced of this one only has to listen to artists themselves. No one is more concerned by these questions than they are.

- 12 And so, simply by identifying this specific *régime* and by highlighting the “local use”¹⁴ that art makes of it, the art world can respond to the current imperative of “research” without having to change its formats and without having to pretend to be something it isn't. Better yet, it can learn to discover in research a critical operation that's often lacking – in art, but also more generally in our time. To do research, after all, is to agree to march ahead, without any guarantees, in the direction of the unknown (the thing we're searching for is never already there). It means accepting incompleteness, failure to reach one's end, but also the singular, the deviant, the minoritarian (research is an adventure in unsurveyed territory). Lastly, research could help weaken the stranglehold of pervasive neo-liberal reasoning: it could help establish (once again) the importance of long durations, a pace of living that allows wide, deep arches in time (the time proper to the *régime* of research) – while art, along with rest of the world, undergoes an acceleration¹⁵ that is also a way of governing by the ordered rhythming of time.¹⁶ It could reinstate the values of minoritarian influence and the radicality of the subjective. It could encourage discussion about the “forms of life” and “collections of practices”¹⁷ produced in the spaces of emancipation dear to art. Etc.
- 13 The analysis of historical cases in the current literature on artistic research is, in this context, all the more precious. For example, it lets us see how the creation of a small art press in Nova Scotia, initially printing only lithographs, then books (the famous NSCAD Press under the direction of Kaspar Koenig and later Benjamin H.D. Buchloh), managed to influence a whole school of artists and train hundreds of students. It lets us see how a singular, original idea (to create a press and invite artists to come and publish their works), which managed to endure due to the exceptional dedication of its collaborators, could develop into a central axis and an immensely positive means of production, a true research laboratory... Or again, still at the NSCAD, under Garry Neill Kennedy's presidency,¹⁸ how the launching of an “operations base” in New York City (in the “modest Soho loft” that the school rented for students between 1972 and 1978 so that they could immerse themselves in the New York art scene) could act as a powerful agency for what at the time was not yet called, in the woollen language of technocracy, “professional insertion.”
- 14 In Halifax, in 1967, artists, theoreticians, students and everyone else at NSCAD “took seriously the admonition not to look back.” “We committed,” writes G. N. Kennedy, “with our heads, our hearts, and our hands to engage the new art in truly new ways.”¹⁹ More than forty years later, times have certainly changed. Today artists are less concerned with making “new” art than with creating works, forms and situations that act on and transform reality (the world, sensibilities) in previously unexplored ways. Our current situation, unlike the 1960s and 1970s, may force artists to learn precisely how to “look back,” to find support in methodologies, skills, and discourses that have not lost their emancipatory potential. This is perhaps nothing new, for example, in the “frenetic dance” highlighted by dOCUMENTA (13). But creating intense, “lively, rattling” events

that “last a long time” is certainly one way of changing, here and now, at least something in this world – of making research work while still producing art.

NOTES

1. This quotation appears as an epigraph to the DOCUMENTA (13) exhibition’s publicity materials.
2. Phrases inscribed, along with others, on the walls in the entrance of the Fridericianum Museum.
3. From the exhibition booklet. In it, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, artistic director of the 2012 exhibition, continues: “These are the terrains where politics are inseparable from a sensual, energetic, and wordly alliance between current research in various scientific and artistic fields and other knowledges, both ancient and contemporary. DOCUMENTA (13) is driven by a holistic and non-logocentric vision that is shared with, and that recognizes the knowledges of animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people.”
4. <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk>
5. This was the goal of the conference in Geneva entitled *Figures et méthodes de la transmission artistique: quelle histoire?*, coordinated by Valérie Mavridorakis and Christophe Khim in 2011. See the noteworthy examples in Gary Neill Kennedy’s study of the NSCAD (which he directed between 1967 and 1990).
6. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, one of the founding texts of modern sociology, was published by Max Weber in 1904 and 1905.
7. Cf. Boltanski, Luc, Chiapello, Eve. *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999.
8. For a summary of these reforms in the French university system, see the collective site “Sauvons la recherche”: <http://sauvonslarecherche.fr>
9. John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971), performance and lithograph printed in 50 copies by the NSCAD in 1971. Cf. Kennedy, Gary Neill. *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1968-1978*, Cambridge: MIT Press; Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2012, p.101
10. Cf. Marmande, Francis. *Faites les fêtes*, Paris : Lignes, 2012
11. Picabia, Francis. *Jésus-Christ Rastaquouère*, Paris : Allia, 1996
12. See the remarks of Dominique Pasqualini, quoted in “Les Ecoles d’art à la sauce de Bologne” by Jean-Marc Adolphe, *Mouvement*, no. 62, September-October 2012.
13. This must be the minimal definition of what constitutes research, in art as in any other disciplinary field. “Research” included all the activities of a given field carried out with in view to producing and developing objects that, freely shared among peers, will enlarge the field in question – and that, leaving academia, will contribute something to the society affected by this field of study.
14. Elie During, Laurent Jeanpierre, Christophe Kihm and Dork Zabunyan, in the introduction to the work *In actu: de l’expérimental dans l’art* cited above, explain that there is a “local use” of experimentation, in other words “points of experimentation in a process or practice that does not not necessarily make regular use of it,” p. 15.
15. Cf. Rosa, Harmut. *Accélération: une critique sociale du temps*, Paris : La Découverte, 2010

16.

Cf. for

example: Citton, Yves. « Improvisation, rythmes et mondialisation. Quatorzethèse sur la fluidification sociale et les résistances à l'ordre rythmique », *Rhuthmos*, July 2, 2010

17. Cf. Leibovici, Frank. *(Des Formes devie) : une écologie des pratiques artistiques*, Paris : Questions Théoriques, 2012

18. Kennedy, G.N. *Op.cit.*, p. XXIII

19. Kennedy, G.N. *Op.cit.*, p. XXIII